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07 - Two Childhood Friends

That night, I opened my door to find that I had a visitor. Namely, Honoka.
“What could you be doing at this late hour?” I ask, surprised.
“I ran away from home!” Honoka responds with her face puffed and her eyes upturned. Then, acting as if it were perfectly natural, she takes off her shoes and steps inside my house, carrying her luggage with her.
“Oh, Honoka? Are you staying the night?”
Honoka answers my mom with a nod, “Yeah, if you’ll pardon my intrusion! I wanted Umi to help me with some homework!”
As she puts on a smile and giggles nervously, I see a hint of red in her eyes. *Oh, she’s done it again*, I think to myself.
I believe it’s been some time since she last did this.
I check the standing clock by the doorway, and it reads 8 PM.
“How much homework do you expect to get done this late in the day?” I whisper to myself.
Fshhhhh.
The sound of water running through to the bathroom shower echoes through the pipes. In the meantime, I make a call to the Kousaka house.
“Yes, she did. She just arrived… I’m afraid so… She will be staying the night with us.”
As I bow my head in the direction of the phone mounted in the empty hallway, I hear a bright voice, much like Honoka’s, but deeper and huskier, through the receiver.
“Good grief, I’d expected as much from her. That girl’s seriously a one-trick pony. But I’m sure her father would be a little shocked if she really ran away and nobody knew where she’d gone, a hah hah.”
That would be Honoka’s mother, whom I know quite well. A lively, unreserved, and refreshing woman, and a hard-working, wonderful mother.
My own mother, on the other hand, seemed sheltered and demanding, and strictly enforced proper speech and conduct, so I used to admire Honoka’s mother.
I remember wishing many times that I could be sisters with Honoka and Yukiho, and eat *manjuu* every day.
My older sister is far older than me, and had long since left the house, so perhaps I felt lonely, being essentially an only child. My daily training was also exhausting, as well.
“Umi, I’m done showering! Thanks for lending me your pajamas! Ah, I feel so refreshed♪”
Honoka has stepped out of the bathroom. I quickly throw the phone back on the hook.
“Will you be sleeping in my bed tonight?”
“Yep! Traditional-style futons are nice, but snuggling up together in a sofa bed is fun too, don’t you think!?”
As I thought, it seems she never had a mind to do any homework in the first place. I smile reluctantly.
My orange, checkered pajamas look far better on Honoka than they do on myself.

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“Ready to turn off the lights?”
“Yep?”
With the room darkened, I lie down next to Honoka, facing the ceiling.
“Aren’t you going to ask me why I ran away?” Honoka whispers.
It’s always been like this.
Whenever Honoka’s on a sleepover, she’ll start talking as soon as the lights are off, as if a switch flips inside her head.
“Well then… why?”

I'd actually already heard the reason from her mother, but Honoka seems unusually eager to talk about it, so ask anyway. And, as if waiting for this moment…
"It's my dad! I'm so sick of him! At first he wasn't against μ's at all, just like, 'You'll never get some fancy job like being an idol anyway, so do whatever you like as long as you don't slack off in the store!' but now he's a total grouch!"
Honoka fidgets nervously in the darkness.
"I've been helping out in the store as much as I can, and for schoolwork, I've got you and Kotori and the rest of μ's helping me out, so I think that's pretty good compared to how I usually am. Of course, since I'm practicing with μ's every day, I'm a lot busier, and I don't have my life together like you do, so sometimes I'm too late to help close up shop, and when there's morning practice, I can't help clean then either, but I didn't think it really mattered since Yukiho covers for me. When I talked about μ's before, he'd smile and tell me to go on, but now he just makes these scary faces and it keeps getting worse every day…"
Honoka's voice in the darkness starts sounding somewhat timid.
"He was like, 'It's always μ's this, μ's that! Well if μ's is that important to you, then you can quit and we'll make Yukiho inherit the shop instead!' Why's it gotta be one or the other? I've been doing my best with μ's to save Otonoki, but that's because I love our town and I love the Homura, so it's really all the same…"
I hear Honoka sniffling and crying a little. Somehow, I think I can sympathize a little with Honoka's father.
He must be feeling lonely.
Honoka used to be a bright and cheerful, if childish, girl, one who always put her family first. But now that she's started μ's, she has started to change.
She has found something more precious and enchanting to her than anything else.
And, like a romance, μ's has caused Honoka to grow.
Even as someone who has known Honoka for so long, I can tell that she's changing. Moreso because I've been changing as well.
For better or for worse, my parents aren't the type to speak their minds so directly in times like these, so I've avoided meeting a fate similar to Honoka's for the time being.
Honoka, your father must be feeling jealous
I know that he's lonely because μ's has taken his lovely little daughter away from him.
That's what I want to say, but…
"Maybe I need to back off from the μ's stuff a bit…"
I can't bring myself to say it.
All of a sudden, I find myself talking about something entirely different.
"Honoka, do you remember? You used to run away from home all the time when we were little."
Is it because I was unsure whether I could properly sympathize with her, or because I felt the same way her father did?
"Huh? Did I really?"
"Yes, you did. Back then, whenever you fought with Yukiho, your parents would tell you to be more mature, and then you would charge out and over to my house."
"Oh, yeah! Man, I owe you bigtime for all those sleepovers!"
"Do you remember the time we ran away to the Kanda Myoujin shrine, back in third grade?"
"Wha, the Kanda Myoujin? Kanda Myoujin… Kanda Myoujin… hmmm… oh, yeah!"

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On that night, we snuck away from home and into the Kanda Myoujin shrine. Thinking back on it now, it was only shortly before our bedtimes, so it was probably only a little before 8 PM. It was hardly late night, but back then, we almost never went outside after school let out at 5, so it looked to be rather late at night to us.

The Kanda Myoujin, which was so lively and crowded in the daytime, was now covered in a mysterious aura of darkness and silence.
And the reason we were running away… is something I no longer remember.
Honoka and Yukiho must have been stealing each other's food, or Honoka hid a test she got a 30 on, or another one of the usual reasons. After running away several times, Honoka realized that her parents would know she was at my house. So, of all the things she could have done, she decided to camp out.
"Hey, Umi, you think it's true that ghosts show up at the Kanda Myoujin at night?"
"No, Honoka, don't say that! I'm already scared enough the people at the shrine will get mad at us!"
Sitting down, the wooden donations box was enough to entirely hide our small bodies from view.
The inner shrine was strangely calming, and less scary than I'd expected, but I was more nervous that an adult might find us and get mad.
If anyone knew we were outside now, they would yell at us. And, if they found out we ran away from home, they might call the police and have us arrested.
When my shoulders started shaking at the thought, Honoka hugged me tightly.
"Are you scared, Umi? It's okay, everything's fine. I'll get rid of any ghosts that show up. I'm a total dodgeball pro, right? If there's a ghost, I'll just smack it on the head with a ball and make him go away!"
Hm? I responded with the first thing that came to mind.
"But you can't touch ghosts, can you? Even if you throw a ball at it, won't it just pass through? And we don't even have any balls here."
Then, Honoka said, "Oh, I know, I'll just whack it with my bag! It's got some chocolate cookies in there, but we can still eat them even if they get crushed a little! Pretty clever, right?"
You didn't listen to the first half of that, did you? I thought.

Rustle rustle
A hint of movement flashed in a nearby thicket.
"Kya, kyaaaaa! It's a ghoooost!"
Honoka screamed and ran away too fast for me to realize what was happening. I stood and stared at her dumbfounded for a moment before returning to my senses.
"Honoka, come back! I don't think that was a ghost, it must have been some…"
As I call out and chase after her, lights come on inside the shrine.
Oh no, someone heard us!
I falter and checked around me before returning to my desperate pursuit of Honoka.
We can make our getaway now, get home, and everyone else will be none the wiser. That was my plan.
I was more scared of being caught by an adult than a ghost.
Worries swirled in my young mind that if they found me, they could arrest me and lock me in prison. Then, I wouldn't be able to go home or eat anything for several years,
and they'd force me to work for them.
I ran for my life, but I was easily caught.
"There's a kid! What's a kid doing here!? Was there a kidnapping!?
Hearing a voice behind me, I turned around to see a policeman.
My body froze over.
Oh no,I was right! I'm going to get arrested!
While I was still frozen with fear, the policeman took my hand and said, "Don't be scared. Are you hurt?"
I was so scared I thought I would die on the spot.
In the meantime, Honoka kept running on her own.
"Is there another!? This one's pretty stubborn!"

I could do nothing but pray that Honoka could save herself.
Eventually, Honoka vanished from sight, taking advantage of the shrine's complicated architecture and her own tag expertise.

I followed the policeman to the shrine office and sat there, wrapped in a borrowed towel and sipping *amazake* while waiting for him to read out my prison sentence.
The policeman eventually reappeared with a bothered expression on his face and said, "Well, we're in a spot of trouble here. We couldn't find any sign of that other girl. We actually came to the Kanda Myoujin shrine because we heard there was a robbery tonight and the culprit fled here, but we haven't seen them, either. Do you have any idea where that girl might be? We'd better find her before anyone else d-"
I charged out of the office without a word.
Behind me, I hear the policeman shout, "Hey, wait, where are y-"
No, I don't have time to wait
Honoka's in danger, Honoka's in danger, Honoka's in danger!
I chanted those words repeatedly, like a spell.
It's strange. I couldn't move an inch when I was running away, but now that I'm doing it for Honoka, I'm running like the wind.
I can no longer remember where I went and how I got there.
It felt like an instant and like eternity, at the same time.
At any rate, I found her eventually.
She was hiding the thicket next to the donation box where it all began
When I asked afterwards, she said that once the ghost came out, there couldn't possibly be any ghosts left there. The usual, incomprehensible Honoka logic.

"Umi Umi Umi Umi…"
Honoka grabbed me tight, as tears and snot ran down her face.
I embraced her in return and said to her, "It's okay, Honoka. That wasn't a ghost or anything, it was a policeman. The same one who works at the police box where we always play ta-
"Umi Umi Umi Umi Umi"
Wiping her tears and snot off on me, it seems she was unable to hear anything I said.
As I watched her, I started crying too. The two of us bawled our heads off until our parents came to pick us up.
We were crying so hard that our parents surmised we had went through some terrifying experience, and so they took us back, ignoring for the most part that we had run away from home. However, Honoka refused to let go of me, so in the end she ended up staying the night at my house.
How did she ever forget this? Perhaps she had unconsciously wished to forget.
But,
For me, it was a valuable learning experience.
It taught me that whenever Honoka asks me to do something, she always ends up causing an unreasonable amount of havoc.

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"Um, Honoka, I've been meaning to tell you this, but that rustling in the thicket that day was probably a cat or robber, not a gh-" I say, looking next to me.
Zzzzzz…
Honoka is already fast asleep.
Oy vey.

I sit up a little and stare into Honoka's face.
Though it may sound a little clichéd, we couldn't leave each other even if we wanted to.
Whenever either one of us was in trouble, we've always helped each other out.
And, you've become essentially family to me, without me even realizing it. It feels strange.
Considering how unapproachable I am, it must be because of this place that I have such priceless friends like Honoka and Kotori.
No, not just those two.
I have all the rest of μ's.
It was because I was born in this city, and raised in it.
The time we spent in this environment created the friends I have today.
I am a product of our time here.
And, my everlasting memories here are a treasure that nothing can ever destroy.

Honoka, I'll never allow you to quit μ's, no matter what you say.
I shall support you in difficult times.
Of course, further down the path we're taking,
There will be times when you break down, times when you cry, times when you want to run away, and times when you can't take anymore.
And, there will be days when dark clouds appear overhead and block out the radiance of your dreams.
But, I will support you, always.
Until the golden luminance of the sun shines across the blue skies and down upon you once more.
Why?
I don't know the reason myself. I think it is because I share the same feelings you do.
I can still hear your voice from the day you were crying, "Umi, Umi, Umi, Umi."
Honoka,
I love μ's, I love Otonoki Academy, and somewhere down the line, I've started enjoying being a school idol.
And, I love everyone around us.
Our friends with whom we share a common dream.
Now, we can break through anything in our way.
Let's run together, beyond the stars we saw in the sky that night at the Kanda Myoujin. I want to truly become a star, and protect Otonoki.
And the people precious to me…
Honoka sleeps soundly beside me.

The next morning, Honoka vigorously scarfs down two servings of my mother's breakfast.
As always, my mother jokes, "How about you become our daughter already?"
And, as always, Honoka responds, "Sure I will!"
Before we leave for school, Yukiho arrives with a delivery of things Honoka forgot, and she accepts them eagerly.
"See you later♪"
That smile she wears as she shouts back towards my house is something I could never possibly match, I think.
And for some reason, I laugh.
The two of us have been friends since we were still in our mothers' bellies.
I know that even after we grow up, even after we reach middle age, and even after
we're old and gray, we'll be together with one another for an eternity.
Always, and forever.

Comments♡Hanayo
The energetic and cheerful Honoka and the cool and sharp Umi seem like polar opposites at first glance, but they've actually been best friends since forever ago, and I really admire the two of them. They have such different auras and ways of thinking, but whenever push comes to shove, it's like they can communicate just by looking into each other's eyes, without even saying anything. They're so dazzling, it makes me kind of jealous. I hope I can be together with them forever too♡